

## Breakout Discussions: President's Management Agenda and Citizen-Centered Government

### 1a. Using Internet Dialogue to Enhance Public Involvement



The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was interested in the Internet Dialog concept as a means of involving broad public representation in the development of its Public Involvement Policy. The subject matter and nature of this policy required significant citizen and stakeholder involvement, but the Agency did not have sufficient resources for the number and range of regional public meetings necessary to provide the required public involvement. EPA had participated in a Libraries Dialog in September of 2000 that was very successful because of the subject's wide appeal to many audiences.

The Libraries Dialog, held September 18-29, 2002, explored opportunities for libraries to be a key source in the community for environmental information. This electronic forum brought together 550 community members, librarians, state, local, and national organizations from 49 states to discuss this topic on line. The discussion centered on how to strengthen libraries and on-line resources to expand citizen and community access to local, state, and federal environmental resources and build capacity for broader participation in environmental decision making.

EPA contracted with Information Renaissance in May 2001 (\$50K from the agency and \$50K from the Hewlett Foundation) to conduct an Internet Dialog on EPA's draft Public Involvement Policy. Information Renaissance is a nonprofit corporation that promotes the use of networking infrastructure to support education, community development, economic revitalization and democratic expression.

There are several activities that must be conducted before an Internet Dialog is held to make it effective and worthwhile. Those pre-dialog activities include: announcing dialog to recruit participants, soliciting appropriate participants from state, local, and federal agencies, developing a relevant agenda, researching and building a briefing book (to be made available on line prior to the dialog), recruiting expert panelist for each day's topic and agency hosts for each day to keep the dialog moving and focused, briefing panelists and hosts on roles and use of dialog web site, responding to telephone, mail, and E-mail/Internet contacts; and publicizing the dialog broadly.

EPA and Information Renaissance held the Public Involvement Internet Dialog July 10-20, 2001, making the dialog and comments available 24 hours a day seven days a week with administrative support available 10-12 hours each weekday (to accommodate time zone differences) and experts available 8-10 hours each weekday. This dialog attracted 1144 participants, 36 experts, 41 agency hosts from 50 states, 2 territories, and 6 other countries.

People could participate at their convenience, reviewing comments and adding comments of their own. EPA partnered with the Hewlett Foundation, Information Renaissance, and Resources for the Future to conduct the dialog, organize and analyze the comments received, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the process. The daily topics for the Internet Dialog on EPA's Public Involvement Policy included the following:

- Identifying and reaching the interested public and those hardest to reach
- Effective collaborative decision processes
- Required public participation (for permitting, rule-making, etc)
- Technical and financial assistance
- Local environmental partnerships - Superfund, Brownfields, etc.
- State, Tribal and local government issues
- Evaluation and accountability

During the dialog, administrative management and support is required to accomplish the following tasks: respond to E-mail and telephone inquiries or comments; supplement Internet for those not having access (via fax and posting faxed/telephone information on the web site); review all comments and refer those to appropriate agency contacts that need response; organize comment threads to assist participants and focus discussion which will later help agency staff who review and respond to comments and consider them for incorporation into the policy; develop and send participants coaching messages; prepare panelists and hosts for the next day's discussion; review all input and gather information for the plan for implementing the policy; prepare and distribute electronic media updates.

The themes on public involvement from the dialog were:

- Start early and do it often
- Go local on locals' terms
- Collaborate/partner with locals
- Listen to local/historical knowledge
- Make every effort to be inclusive and use all means to reach people
- Provide equal access to data and decisions
- Build capacity to participate
- Transparent and accountable processes
- Technical and financial resources
- Plan thoroughly and invest resources for "real" involvement.

The EPA staff monitored the discussion, contributing explanations and background information. They also collected information on good ideas and negative experiences. Information Renaissance created web tables, search engines, discussion threads, and provided administrative management and support on the web site.

The Dialog is posted on a web site with search capabilities. To search the web tables on the dialog, users select a topic and enter one or more keywords. The search will return excerpts containing those keywords. If a topic only is selected, all excerpts on that topic will be identified.

Resources for the Future conducted a follow up survey and an evaluation of the Public Involvement Internet Dialog, which included the following findings:

- Participation leveled off at 50-60 people each day posting 80-100 messages each day
- One-third of daily postings came from new participants
- Most participants already familiar with EPA

- Digital Divide – white, educated, >40 years old
- 75% had positive experience with Dialog
- 71% learned a great deal
- 85% said EPA should use this technique in the future.

The dialog was not part of the formal comments to the proposed policy but the summary tables helped focus issues that the policy needed to address and helped agency staff develop a more effective plan for implementing the policy across all programs and regions in the agency. EPA used dialog information to develop a brochure on the policy and fact sheets for internal and external use, which give an overview of the policy and special topics (environmental justice, tribal consultation, overcoming barriers to effective involvement, and effective public meetings). EPA policy implementation staff will facilitate information sharing, conduct and encourage evaluation, and promote training on policy implementation.



### Website Addresses

- **Draft Policy:**  
<http://www.epa.gov/stakeholders/policy.htm>
- **Public Involvement Dialogue:** <http://www.network-democracy.nrg.epa.gov/welcome.shtml>
- **Libraries Dialogue:** <http://www.network-democracy.nrg.epa.gov/>
- **Draft Recommendations for Implementing EPA's Public Involvement Policy:**  
<http://www.epa.gov/stakeholders/implementationpublic.htm>
- **Evaluation Report "Democracy On Line":**  
[http://www.rti.org/reports/PDI\\_files/democracyonline.pdf](http://www.rti.org/reports/PDI_files/democracyonline.pdf)